

Mother Nature's hired guns try to beat back fire and human damage

By Officer Candidate Christian Venhuizen
Public Affairs Specialist
Wyoming National Guard

CAMP GUERNSEY, Wyo. – The Army's biggest guns and rocket systems, heaviest trucks and chassis, wheeled and tracked, dig their way through the grass lands and hillsides of Camp Guernsey's training sites, in Eastern Wyoming.

The damage done by those manmade devices were compounded by fires, which in the summer of 2006, burned up thousands of acres. The worst came from the Chicago Fire, leaving approximately 7,000 acres, of the 21,000 that caught fire, burned so badly there is nothing left growing.

"It definitely, definitely put a hurting on it," Dustin Kafka, manager of the Integrated Training Area Management program for Wyoming Army National Guard training sites, said. ITAM is based at Camp Guernsey, the state's primary training center, and serves as the center's reclamation expert for damage incurred by training or in military training areas.

Some 10,000-12,000 acres burned in Camp Guernsey were timbered. That included training areas, and access corridors into the training areas. Kafka said those trees, if left alone, will topple, possibly on a vehicle, or in the worst scenario, on a person.

With that in mind, the ITAM crew added clearing hazard trees to its list of projects. The Wyoming ITAM chief said his team is cutting them down and stacking them in one section of the camp's north training site for the public to harvest as firewood.

"At this time, there's not really a whole lot we can do where it burned so hot. It sterilized the soil," Kafka said. That leads to another glaring problem: "Erosion is a big deal; it really is problematic on many levels."

ITAM crew members are working with other Wyoming National Guard departments and state agencies to come up with a comprehensive plan to fund the soil stabilization and reseeding efforts in the damaged areas.

Most of the reseeding will be done Johnny Appleseed style. “Literally by hand,” Kafka said. “There is no way to put machines in the burned areas. It’s going to be a struggle.” Only 1,000 acres will be treated by aerial seeding. He said initial recovery for the most badly burned areas could take five years.

“Right now, we’re focused on major avenues of approach into the North Training Area,” Col. Steve Mount, Camp Guernsey garrison commander, said. “We’re ensuring that there are no safety hazards from burnt trees.”

The areas that were less severely burned are already seeing new growth. Kafka said they are also trying to mitigate the growth of undesirable plants.

Kafka’s crew is doing all this on top of their normal reclamation duties caused by damage from troops and all sorts of vehicles. The ITAM team averages 1,500 acres of reseeding moderate and drastic wheel tracks per year.

Camp Guernsey’s environmental policy mirrors the Department of the Army’s, reflecting a need to return the land to the way it was before training began. That includes using native seeds, when possible, and eliminating as many of the undesirable plants as possible in the training areas.

“I’m a firm believer in ITAM,” Mount said. “Even if the (Department of the Army) didn’t mandate it; as good land stewards it’s something we would do.”

The M-109 Paladins, with their long reaching barrels, and the M-270 A-1 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, all with their grinding tracks dig up the native soil and spend a lot of time seemingly scaring the otherwise pristine landscape.

Not that the wheeled vehicles are any better. The weight of towed howitzer cannons behind heavy trucks takes its toll.

“The towed howitzers leave a light trail until they’re turned around,” Kafka said. Those turns tear up grass and soil.

Mount said Kafka and his crew have worked wonders at the camp, which is designated as a maneuver training center – heavy. That designation is like one of those big flashing casino signs, drawing in some of the biggest weapons and vehicles the Army, Marines and Air Force have.

“Even the tracked vehicles don’t tear it up any worse than we can fix it,” Kafka said.

A simplified version of the reclamation process begins with identifying the damaged areas, by applying sound reclamation techniques and letting nature take its course. Areas that could have turned into mud bogs end up blending in with their surroundings.

“It’s about long term sustainability,” Kafka said, noting there is damage that isn’t reported that his crew has to track down. “We have to take care of it all.”

“The ITAM staff fully grasps the vision of Camp Guernsey and the Wyoming Army National Guard,” Mount said. “They need very little guidance, they’re very proactive.”

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Photos available upon request or at the Wyoming National Guard Web site
<http://www.wy.ngb.army.mil/PAO/release/release.asp>

SUGGESTED CUTLINES:

061907-A-0301V-0012.jpg -- Wyoming’s Integrated Training Area Management program manager Dustin Kafka examines an area damaged by vehicles used by Soldiers training at Camp Guernsey. Kafka and his team repair the damage to keep Camp Guernsey viable for future use.

061907-A-0301V-0003.jpg -- A tracked vehicle, maneuvering on the grasslands of Camp Guernsey, leaves a noticeable trail. The Integrated Training Area Management program team at the camp will inspect the trail to identify the damage done and what repairs are needed to restore the land.

061907-A-0301V-0029.jpg -- Tracked military vehicles left their mark on the land at the North Training Area, at the Wyoming National Guard's Camp Guernsey Training Center. The Integrated Training Area Management program team at the camp will repair the damage.

061907-A-0301V-0017.jpg -- Burned trees line sections of major access corridors in the Camp Guernsey's North Training Area. Those trees pose a hazard to travelers along the way. They are slated for removal by the camp's Integrated Training Area Management program team.